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Former Peace Corps volunteers come back to Cochabamba to celebrate 40th anniversary

A group of 11 former Peace Corps volunteers gathered in Cochabamba for the weekend to celebrate forty years since they came to Bolivia to live in several Cochabamba communities, including Arani, Tarata, Vinto, Mizque, Aiquile, and Quillacollo. Not having lost an ounce of their volunteer spirit or their passion for working hard to improve human quality of life, they engaged in a clean up campaign in Arani, as part of their Anniversary Celebration program.

The Peace Corps was established in 1961 to promote world peace and friendship through the service of American volunteers abroad. It is a non-traditional government agency that reflects the most enduring values and ideals of the American people: generosity, civic pride, a strong work ethic, and a commitment to service. More than 153.000 Americans have promoted these values through their service in the Peace Corps for more than 40 years. Currently, the Peace Corps works in 78 developing countries.

In Bolivia there are 132 volunteers providing technical support to communities in Cochabamba, Oruro, Chuquisaca, Tarija, Santa Cruz, and Potosí in the areas of basic sanitation, education, micro-businesses, agriculture and natural resources.

The objectives of the Peace Corps, helping people in developing countries to meet their basic needs and promoting mutual understanding between Americans and the people of other cultures, are as relevant now as they were in 1961. Throughout the world, the Peace Corps Volunteers continue to bring a spirit of hope and optimism to the struggle for progress and human dignity.

And the way in which they help solve problems and provide assistance and practical advice is both optimistic and pragmatic; the Peace Corps consistent success is based on the commitment of the volunteers to teaching skills and abilities that provide the people with whom they live for two years the tools to change and improve their own lives.

"Sometimes," says Laura, a volunteer who worked several years ago in Oruro, "people abroad have a stereotyped image of what the U.S. is, one learned from television, films and the politics of our country. But all of that is very different from who the American people really are.

Through the experience of interchange we show them we are just as they are; we care for the same things, we love our families, enjoy life, we want to have a better life, help people. The Peace Corps does a lot for the United States, because foreign people can see that we are human beings and not the bad persons that sometimes they think we are. And for us, it is an experience that changes our lives forever. Being a volunteer is an adventure; you know a new culture, many volunteers learn a new language; also you are able to help people who are in need. For me, the experience was very enriching."

Rebecca, from Iowa, who had the uncommon experience of falling in love and getting married while she was a volunteer in Machacamarca, agrees with Laura, “You know people who change and affect your life forever and that remains in your heart.”

Seth, from Colorado says, “I have a godson in Cochabamba, with whom we are going to have a relationship for life.” He volunteered in Tarija for a foundation that provided training in labor skills. “You don’t realize what you have until you go back to your country and then you ponder how deep and enriching this experience has been.”

Unlike most development organizations, the Peace Corps works directly at the rural community level. Volunteers become members of those communities and live in the field, sharing the housing, meals, customs, and lives of the farmers. Therefore, it becomes an unforgettable life and cultural exchange experience.

This life-changing experience was recently recalled by 11 former volunteers who worked in Bolivia 40 years ago, in the 1960’s. They decided to celebrate their anniversary by returning to Cochabamba from different parts of the United States and brought their families with them, so that they could know the country in which they lived and worked for two years when they were young. The parents will show their children why they have been telling them so many things about Bolivia. Wives and husbands will know the places that contributed to making their mates such special persons. In the group there is a couple that was formed in Bolivia at that time. They continue to work pursuing the ideal that brought them together forty years ago.

Joining the Peace Corps is not an easy thing, since there are several requirements to be met:

- The volunteers have to fill out a long form with all their data including information regarding any previous work as volunteers. Then they have an interview and there is an evaluation process that takes from six to eight months.
- A key point is the volunteers’ health. They have to undergo intensive medical examinations. They also have to submit employment references. Most volunteers already have a B.S. or B.A. However, other volunteers have not attended university but have a degree at a technical level or three years of work experience in a technical branch, which enables them to help and teach in the places where they are sent.
- They must be U.S. citizens of at least 18 years of age.
- Upon being accepted, the volunteers have to spend a three-month training course in the country to which they have been sent. They take native language, technical and culture-based classes. If the volunteers pass the course satisfactorily they are ready to begin to work.

In Bolivia the Peace Corps works in four sectors:

- Microbusiness development and community-based tourism.

- Agricultural expansion and education on nutrition.
- Basic sanitation, including the construction of water systems and latrines.
- Natural Resources, including environment education

The three primary goals that define the Peace Corps' mission are:

- 1) Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
- 2) Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
- 3) Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.